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WOMAN SUFFRAGE IN ENGLAND.

BY THE RIGHT HON. LADY DILKE.

THE present position of this question, in the United Kingdom, may be described as that of a deadlock, and the prospect of any change in the existing situation cannot be regarded as other than exceedingly remote.

The agitation began in 1867, when household suffrage—so called—was established here as the basis of the franchise. Exceptions were continued at that time in the case of peers—who were otherwise heard in Parliament—aliens, lunatics, idiots, minors, and women. This classification afforded food for much profane jesting at the expense of the last-named on the list and provoked indignant protest, more often than not couched in language the reverse of sober, from women of the more foolish sort. This, indeed, has been the stumbling block in the way of all those questions which may be called “women’s questions.” Each time that a real and serious grievance has been signalled to public attention, its consideration on its merits has been disturbed and often prevented by the outburst of absurd pretensions which it has, unfortunately, called forth. The more fluent are generally the more foolish, and, whenever sex disqualifications have to be discussed, are wont to embarrass those who value self-control, reticence, right judgment, and weighty speech. Yet I will honestly confess that there is something, to my mind, very pathetic in the wildest statements of those who have been called the “wild women.” They have suddenly found a voice for wrongs which have been endured—for the most part in silence—for centuries. “No one knows,” said Cardinal Manning to me one day when we were on this subject, “the depth of the sufferings of married women save the doctor and the priest.” What wonder that they and their spinster sisters should raise a

strange and conflicting clamor, uncertain as yet whether they most desire to confine men within the narrow border of their own limitations or snatch from them an equal enjoyment of unrestrained liberty.

This determination to ignore any unequal pressure of social obligations and to claim rights precisely similar to those enjoyed by men accompanied even the initial stages of the women's suffrage movement. Even those who could not believe that absolute freedom from all the disabilities of sex was the first condition of an earthly paradise imagined that even the inclusion of a limited number of women would have the effect of remedying certain women's grievances, "the right to vote" being, as I then thought and wrote, "the right without which all others were insecure." We supposed, indeed, that it would be impossible to maintain the exclusion of women if the franchise were to rest on a ratepaying qualification based in theory, if not in fact, on property, and we fondly hoped that the sense of direct responsibility might strengthen in us certain qualities in which our very utterances on the question we had at heart showed the majority of us to be grievously deficient. Yielding to none in our admiration for the courage, force, right thinking, sense of honor, and duty shown by shining examples of English women, we could not shut our eyes to the emotionalism, sentimentality, faddism, and fondness for crooked ways which are the favorite weaknesses of too many amongst our sisters.

At first the advocates of the measure met with a considerable amount of friendly interest, not untinged, perhaps, by a shade of mockery; it was not until the agitation had spread over a considerable section of society—chiefly represented by the professional classes—that opposition was developed and a certain impatience of any discussion of the subject began to show itself, which was the sure sign of gathering hostility. We were curtly told that our claims were "against nature," a male argument paralleled by the assertion "that God did not intend women to learn Greek," with which a brilliant young scholar of his college once met, in my hearing, the eager advocates of a classical education for women.

Meanwhile, a society was formed—the National Society for Women's Suffrage—which started hopefully, encouraged by the fact that the so-called household suffrage actually restored an

analogy which for a long time had ceased to exist between local and imperial suffrage, and by the recollection that in Great Britain women had always enjoyed some forms of this local household suffrage. Early in the Parliament of 1868, under considerations of this order, the municipal franchise was bestowed on women (at the suggestion of Sir Charles Dilke), and Mr. Forster's Education Bill, which had been introduced without School Boards, was altered by the House (also on the motion of Sir Charles Dilke), so as to be administered by the ratepayers, men and women alike. The thin end of the wedge had now, it was supposed, been introduced, and the more eager partisans redoubled their energetic efforts to force on the favorable solution, which they looked upon as certain, by every means in their power.

Other and perhaps more serious grievances from which women especially suffered were taken up concurrently with the suffrage agitation. The zealous and self-sacrificing persistency of Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy, steadily backed by the increasing numbers of the women suffragists, ensured, in great measure, the passing of the Married Women's Property Acts, which were finally carried through, thanks to the exertions of Mr., now Sir John, Hibbert. To the unwearying efforts of the same lady we were, also, to a large extent, indebted for the success which crowned our endeavors to amend the law in other points in which it was plainly injurious to women and children ; but our triumph in these matters, whilst, on the one hand, it inspired some of the leaders of the movement with fresh courage, caused others to reflect that it was not absolutely necessary to possess a vote in order to obtain a just consideration for our grievances. These asked themselves whether what they had regarded as the most weighty reasons for demanding a great social change had any real existence ; it seemed as if organized and reasonable appeal to public opinion might be a force sufficient to procure such ends as were to be desired, not only in the interest of the individual, the class, or the sex, but in the interest of the state.

Other considerations now arose which pointed in the same direction. It became clear that neither the ultimate resting-place, nor, if regard were had either to logic or justice, the temporary halting-place could be found in a nominal rate-paying franchise. On the principle of this nominal rate-paying franchise, great inroads have been made by the lodger franchise and

again by the service franchise, and the parliamentary franchise had been differentiated by these from the various local franchises. The assimilation of the local and parliamentary franchises had therefore become impossible except by going considerably further in the direction of extension. This has, indeed, recently been done in the case of parish and district council elections, but not in the case either of municipal or county elections.

The parliamentary franchise now consists of freeholders—who may reside anywhere; of certain leaseholders assimilated to freeholders; of separate occupiers of houses and of parliamentary lodgers, who are required to have a separate occupation of their room. This franchise excludes, generally speaking, sons living with their fathers and mothers, and similar cases; except so far as a few, chiefly barristers and clergymen, possess the university franchise as having taken a master's degree and kept their names, by payment, on the books of their college. The service franchise does not, as is often ignorantly supposed, violate the principle of the necessity of a separate occupation by enfranchising servants living with their masters. It is limited to cases where the servants—generally caretakers or coachmen—have a virtual separate occupation. It will be seen, at once, how these franchises, although in most of them no figures of value are named, are meant to have a base of substantiality or respectability. Judge-made law, however, confirmed by an act of 1878, has admitted the poorest of the London poor as occupiers whilst many of the richest people in the country are excluded. The exclusion of these, in the name of the principle of property, whilst—under the present interpretation of Mr. Goschen's act of 1869—the poorest tenement occupiers were included, made the supposed property basis of the franchise ridiculous, and there grew up a sense that a base for the franchise wholly apart from the possession of property or "separate" dwelling-rooms would have to be discovered.

A split next took place amongst the acknowledged leaders of the movement, the able women who had founded and directed the policy of the National Society for Women's Suffrage. Careful consideration of the details of proposed schemes for the enfranchisement of widows and unmarried women fulfilling the conditions at present required of men, showed that a good many voters of the most undesirable class would be admitted whilst a great proportion of the best women in the country would be arbi-

trarily excluded from the franchise. This limited bill would, it was felt, apparently make the basis of the franchise more logical and, if it were carried, that fact would be used for years to come as an argument against the admission of married women to the suffrage. It would only be carried—especially in the teeth of opposition certain to be offered to it in the House of Lords—through the strongest pledges being given by its promoters that they or many of its principal movers would rest content with the measure and not attempt to reopen the question. It was further argued that should the bill be carried through the House of Commons without a proviso specially excluding married women, even where the wife and not the husband was the ratepayer, it was certain that such a provision would be put in by the House of Lords, and thus would be created a new and arbitrary distinction.

A second society, bearing the name of the Franchise League, was accordingly formed, and this received the adhesion of many of the more distinguished champions of the original movement—Mrs. Jacob Bright, Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy—to whose exertions in the question of the Married Women's Property bill I have already alluded—and Dr. Pankhurst, who had from the first been a capable and consistent advocate of the same practical measure. The centre of their activity is Manchester, but a great amount of work is also done in London and, personally directed by Mrs. Jacob Bright herself, is carried on by the exertions of a large staff of voluntary workers. "Often I have," she says, "as many as fifteen ladies working as unpaid clerks for weeks at my table."

A bill, supported by this society, is now brought in annually by Sir Charles Dilke and backed by Mr. John Burns, Dr. Clark and other democratic members of Parliament. It is a measure of adult suffrage, giving the parliamentary and all local franchises to all grown men and women. It also renders women eligible for all elective offices and consequently for membership of Parliament. A certain clause in this bill, which abolishes University representation, is a stumbling block to the officials of the House of Commons, as it appears, at first sight, to be an excrescence and to concern a different subject. On reflection, it will, however, be clear that the effect of a single franchise would necessarily destroy the University constituencies, and, unless their representation were abol-

ished, leave them with the name and forms of representation and without the fact.

What would be the practical results of such a measure in these islands it is not easy to foresee, but it is interesting to note, in this connection, that Sir Charles Dilke's bill became law, last year, in the colony of South Australia, and a general election has been held under it in which, curiously enough, although almost as many women as men voted, no woman became a candidate. In New Zealand adult suffrage has been carried and an election held under it, but women are not there eligible. In both colonies it has been observed that, contrary to expectation, the effect of the admission of great numbers of women to the franchise has been to increase liberal, radical, and labor forces, and to diminish the strength of the church, chapel, and conservative forces.

It may also be noted, in contrast to these results, that not long ago a test canvass was made in a borough in the north of Scotland of all the women who would have been enfranchised by one of the more moderate measures embodied in the bills recently introduced by the Conservative Members of Parliament who now have charge of the schemes of the old National Society. These bills are usually drawn to give women, for parliamentary purposes, the franchise which some of them now enjoy in municipal and county elections. This would exclude the freeholders and other ownership voters and the lodger, and, unless a clause were put in similar to that inserted in the last Local Government act with regard to parish and district elections, would also exclude the married woman ratepayer. On this basis, the canvass in question was made by competent persons, under the strict supervision of the sitting member. It gave results which were practically the same as those which had been obtained by the men's votes cast at the polls in a recent election and showed that as far as the borough in question was concerned, no political change would ensue from the proposed limited extension of the franchise to unmarried women and widows.

On this point it may be as well here to add that this exclusion of the married woman ratepayer from the municipal franchise is but another example of judge-made law and was not intended by the House of Commons when it gave the municipal franchise to women in 1869. The exclusion is not, however, fully operative. For example, women separated from their

husbands and keeping shops are numerous in the great towns; and the overseers put on, without inquiry, nearly all women rate-payers, leaving the political parties to object to them on the ground of marriage. Political parties often shrink from the odium of the inquiries involved, and in cities like Manchester great numbers of women, who are in fact married women, remain on the municipal register and exercise the franchise.

Here we touch on one of the chief objections maintained against proposals thus limited. Such proposals have not only failed to satisfy the more advanced group, now led by the Franchise League, but are also opposed by others, who object to them precisely on the ground that, by leaving married women unenfranchised, they leave unenfranchised those who, in all probability, are the best informed on subjects of national importance.

In 1889, attention was drawn to this point by an "Appeal against Female Suffrage," which appeared in the June number of the *Nineteenth Century* and was signed by many women of mark and distinction. They did full justice to the excellent services rendered to the State by women in various branches of domestic policy, such as fall to the lot of guardians, of members of school boards, etc., and then went on to say that "when it comes to questions of foreign or colonial policy or of grave constitutional change, then we maintain that the necessary and normal experience of women—generally speaking and in the mass—does not and never can provide them with such materials for sound judgment as are open to men." To say that what never has been never can be was, as I wrote at the time—in an article called "The Next Extension of the Franchise," which appeared in the *Universal Review*—a bold assertion even for a chorus of a hundred ladies. There was, however, no doubt that their statement, if limited to our present experience, was absolutely correct, and since, whatever may be the future organization of labor, there will probably always be some labor which suits men best, we may admit the fact that women in the mass are not likely to be in possession of experience equally valuable in the formation of a sound judgment on certain questions, where the habitual employment of men in civil and military capacities brings them, in the natural course of things, the fullest possible materials for opinion and decision. That this is so, at the present day, is proved not only by the extreme poverty of the materials

(with rare exceptions), which we observe in the public utterances of women on subjects of this class, but by the deterioration in width of interest, if not in breadth and sanity of judgment, in the widows of men who were of great eminence and distinction. The death of the husband often reveals the source whence "materials for judgment" were drawn. Of a friend of my own, a woman of extraordinary grasp and power, the wife of one of the most distinguished men of our day, we used to say, "She is the better man of the two." But, when he was gone, we all felt, in her, a strange loss of weight and power, which she herself realized, saying to me, "It is not only the loss of my life companion; it is the loss of half my brain and the richest source of my intellectual life. I can no longer keep my place in the current of things, since I am cut off by his death from so much knowledge that could only be mine through him."

The class of facts, from which my friend found herself cut off, were exactly those which enable women to judge soundly and vote wisely on "questions of foreign or colonial policy, or of grave constitutional importance," and at present only a limited class have within their reach even vicarious knowledge. This consideration explains the widespread dissatisfaction with which many view the measures which have been pressed so persistently by the National Society on the House of Commons and the public for some time past. It is felt that they exclude exactly that class which, with rare exceptions, possesses "materials for a sound judgment" of political questions. This policy—generally defended as prudent—has undoubtedly tended to alienate many of the oldest supporters of women's suffrage and their alienation has not, as far as I can see, been compensated by any great accession of fresh strength from other quarters. The same names as have been long familiar to the observer continue to occupy the same positions of prominence both in the subscription lists of the National Society and in the reports of its public meetings. One of their chief representatives has, however, recently written in a most hopeful strain of the immediate future, basing her prognostics on the good effect produced by the tranquil exercise of the vote by women in local elections; on their increasing political activity, and, thirdly, on the encouraging example lately set by our colonies. She does not, though, take note of the fact that the colonies, having invariably rejected all limited measures, finally

carried, in the two instances to which allusion has already been made, a bill for adult suffrage.

At home I think it must be admitted that there is no strong popular desire for a great extension of the franchise, such as might give the wider measure, approved by the Franchise League and adopted by South Australia, even a chance of serious consideration. Until such a popular wave of feeling arises in the country it seems unlikely that the question will be touched. We have to deal not only with the habitual conservatism of the English mind, but with the fact that the various opponents of the more limited measures seem strong enough at present to prevent them from becoming law, whilst the advocates of adult franchise, on the other hand, are not within measurable distance of the attainment of their aims—aims which are regarded as being at this moment outside the sphere of practical politics. I return, therefore, to the assertion with which I set out at the beginning of this article, and declare that the present situation as regards women's suffrage in Great Britain and Ireland is simply a deadlock.

We seem, indeed, to be so far from any practical solution, that it may appear foolish even to hazard a conjecture as to the future prospects of the question. There are, nevertheless, strange turns in the affairs of men, and should popular sentiment—irritated by the ludicrous anomalies of our franchise—declare itself, at some no very distant date, in favor of manhood suffrage, it may be that the partisans of women's suffrage would find themselves, in an unexpected way, the masters of the situation. Those who are, at present, divided by the details of the measure which they have at heart would coalesce in the common cause and would probably find themselves powerful enough to bar the passage of any bill in favor of manhood suffrage, except on their own terms. Those terms would be, of course, dictated by the progressive and democratic body which calls itself "The Franchise League." We might, in short, suddenly find ourselves—whether married or single—not only free to exercise the parliamentary and local franchises, but also eligible for all elective offices and consequently free from any legal bar to a seat in the House of Commons.

EMILIA F. S. DILKE.